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Research article

Personal and couple level risk factors: Maternal and paternal parent-child aggression risk

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ABSTRACT

Previous literature examining parent-child aggression (PCA) risk has relied heavily upon mothers, limiting our understanding of paternal risk factors. Moreover, the extent to which factors in the couple relationship work in tandem with personal vulnerabilities to impact PCA risk is unclear. The current study examined whether personal stress and distress predicted PCA risk (child abuse potential, over-reactive discipline style, harsh discipline practices) for fathers as well as mothers and whether couple functioning mediated versus moderated the relation between personal stress and PCA risk in a sample of 81 couples. Additionally, the potential for risk factors in one partner to cross over and affect their partner's PCA risk was considered. Findings indicated higher personal stress predicted elevated maternal and paternal PCA risk. Better couple functioning did not moderate this relationship but partially mediated stress and PCA risk for both mothers and fathers. In addition, maternal stress evidenced a cross-over effect, wherein mothers' personal stress linked to fathers' couple functioning. Findings support the role of stress and couple functioning in maternal and paternal PCA risk, including potential cross-over effects that warrant further inquiry.

1. Introduction

Nearly 700,000 cases of child maltreatment were substantiated in the U.S. in 2015 (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS), 2017). Of these validated cases, over 17% of children were victims of physical maltreatment (DHHS, 2017). Nonetheless, underreporting, as well as biases in reporting, suggests that substantiated reports to protective services vastly underestimate national prevalence rates, particularly for physical abuse (Sedlak et al., 2010).

Physical child abuse can best be represented along a parent-child aggression (PCA) continuum, ranging from physical discipline to child abuse, in which physical abuse arises from parents' inadvertent escalation of physical discipline (Benjet & Kazdin, 2003; Durrant, Trocmé, Fallon, Milne, & Black, 2009; Zolotor, Theodore, Chang, Berkoff, & Runyan, 2008). Physically abusive parents often begin in the sub-abusive end of the spectrum using physical discipline, but at some point, excessive discipline transitions into the abusive range (Graziano, 1994; Whipple & Richey, 1997). *Child abuse potential* estimates a parent's likelihood to engage in PCA that could escalate along such a continuum to become abusive (Milner, 1994). Current evidence suggests child abuse potential is linked to harsh parenting styles (Haskett, Scott, & Fann, 1995; Margolin, Gordis, Medina, & Oliver, 2003; Rodriguez, Smith, & Silvia, 2016) as

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well as abusive physical discipline tactics (Rodriguez, 2010a). Given the underreporting of child abuse to protective services, research relying on substantiated cases limits our understanding of factors involved in the transition from harsh discipline to abuse. Consistent with a prevention approach, recent work focuses on identifying factors relevant to parents engaging in sub-abusive, harsh discipline to provide insight into the context surrounding their escalation toward abuse. Child abuse is also unlikely to be demonstrated overtly during research studies. Thus, we can only approximate a parent's probability of engaging in parent-child aggression, a multidimensional concept labeled *PCA risk*, with indicators of this concept along the PCA continuum that include child abuse potential and harsh parenting behavior.

1.1. Theoretical issues and predictors of interest

Parent-child aggression is best understood by models that incorporate multiple risk factors simultaneously impinging upon the parent. Ecological models of abuse are centered on the parent-child unit which is nested within gradually more distal systems (Belsky, 1980, 1993; Sidebotham, 2001). At the most proximal, ontogenic level, qualities of the parent's individual, intrapersonal functioning are theorized to impact their parenting behavior. More distally, at the next ecological level, factors in the immediate environment within which a parent-child unit is embedded (microsystem level) can impact PCA. In the present study, individual qualities of the parents were considered as occurring at the ontogenic level (personal stress and distress), with qualities of the couple relationship representing the microsystem level.

Several conceptual hypotheses in the broader parenting literature could enrich the current research on PCA. One such hypothesis already characterizes much of the literature studying parenting and PCA, attempting to explain how a parent's personal (ontogenic) level of functioning (e.g., perceived stress) could interfere with family relations, like parent-child or couple interactions (for review of stress contagion hypotheses, see Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington, 1989). However, research examining the spillover hypothesis (i.e., functioning of the couple, at the microsystem level, affecting a parent's relationship with their child) and the crossover hypothesis (i.e., personal functioning of one parent crossing over to affect their partner's functioning) (Bolger et al., 1989) has remained surprisingly limited within the PCA literature. The current study evaluated individual ontogenic level qualities characterizing a parent's personal risk in conjunction with microsystem level couple functioning (spillover and crossover effects) to predict the risk of a parent engaging in PCA.

All but a fraction of the literature on PCA risk has been drawn from samples involving only mothers, generally at an individual, ontogenic level. The underrepresentation of fathers in past research has been a chronic concern, even though fathers represent nearly half of substantiated cases of abuse (DHHS, 2017). Despite frequent calls for greater attention (Guterman & Lee, 2005; Haskett et al., 1996; Lee, Guterman, & Lee, 2008; Martin, 1984; Phares, 1996), the absence of research on fathers continues to plague PCA research (Coohey, 2000; Stith et al., 2009). Adolescent retrospective reports of their family of origin suggest that, although both parents may engage in physical abuse, abuse perpetrated by fathers occurred more often (Sunday et al., 2008). Even when both mothers and fathers utilize harsh physical discipline, physical discipline by males often included more severe and potentially life-threatening use of repeated and prolonged force or pressure (Nobes, Smith, Upton, & Heverin, 1999; Pittman & Buckley, 2006). Thus, determining the factors relevant to heightened PCA risk for fathers remains a high priority.

Extant research utilizing a range of samples (predominantly mothers) has identified a number of ontogenic, personal level factors within the parent that contribute to elevated risk of PCA (see Black, Heyman, & Smith-Slep, 2001; Stith et al., 2009 for reviews). Foremost among these is maternal stress wherein abusive parenting arises most often within high stress environments (Herrenkohl, Herrenkohl, & Egolf, 1983; Margolin & Gordis, 2003; Pianta, 1984). Longitudinal studies demonstrate greater maternal self-reported personal stress or distress can predict later child maltreatment (Kotch, Browne, Ringwall, Dufort, & Ruina, 1997; Windham et al., 2004). With few exceptions, the relation between stress and PCA risk has been evaluated using a measure of stress associated with parenting specifically (e.g., Crouch & Behl, 2001; Holden & Banez, 1996; Rodriguez & Green, 1997). But parents' sense of experiencing lower personal stress actually reduced the relationship between child-related stress and abuse risk (Holden & Banez, 1996), supporting that at-risk parents may less effectively cope with the personal stress unrelated to the parent-child relationship. Relatively less work has considered the relation of paternal stress to their PCA risk, although some suggest that personal distress is less problematic for maltreating fathers than for mothers (Pittman & Buckley, 2006). One study involving a community sample of fathers identified their greater perceived stress, negative life events, and depressive symptoms were separate indirect contributors to their PCA risk (Smith Slep & O'Leary, 2007); however, mothers and fathers were not compared directly and the study relied on a single self-report measure of PCA. Thus, examining perceived, personal level distress, independent of the parent-child system, and clarifying the relationship of paternal distress in elevated PCA risk were of interest in this study.

Personal stress can also contribute to poorer couple functioning, reflecting theories that identify stress in one member of a couple as a significant precursor for couple dysfunction (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Indeed, longitudinal studies document that personal stress of one member of a couple decreases later marital functioning (Ngai & Ngu, 2014) as does one member's depression (Papp, 2010). Together, this literature suggests personal stress and distress appears to spillover to impact the quality of the couple and parent-child relationships.

Relatively less research has considered the role of couple level functioning, apart from intimate partner violence, in predicting PCA risk. Cross-sectionally, relationship dissatisfaction predicted elevated child abuse potential for mothers but not fathers (Schaeffer, Alexander, Bethke, & Kretz, 2005). One study demonstrated that relationship satisfaction contributed to less distress during the transition to parenthood as well as lower child abuse potential (Florsheim et al., 2003), suggesting positive couple functioning may serve a moderating role. Longitudinally, poor marital quality was predictive of later child maltreatment (Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Salzinger, 1998) and coercive, conflictual, or violent relationships predicted later child abuse risk

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